

Andrew B. Smith: Don't make poverty a crime in Northampton

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Reading recent coverage of the Committee on Community Resource's downtown forums has been less than inspiring. I have great concerns about placing the blame of the state of any downtown, let alone ours, on the mere presence of panhandlers.

What does it mean to panhandle? It means that someone has decided to make their poverty visible, that they have moved into the public sphere and sought to carve out a space for themselves as a poor person. We should have space in our public places for more than the middle-class experience.

As an enlightened community with a long history of being on the right side of so many social issues, it saddens me to see Northampton falling into the trap of blaming poor people for our problems. When discussing the future of our downtown, it is disheartening to read about a public forum casting blame on people that society has left behind.

I understand that there might be some frustration with people who are conducting a "commercial" activity in an area with valuable real estate or that there might be the perception that panhandlers are scamming people out of money.

I also understand that if you are working 60 hours a week to keep your downtown property attractive in order to contribute to our community's vibrancy, then the presence of someone "drafting off of your wake" would be maddening.

Nevertheless, any attempt to use public resources to restrict the agency of the downtrodden and to reduce their place in our civic life harms us all. If we are an open and welcoming community, then we have to make space in our town for people whose truths make us uncomfortable.

Is it bad for business? I can't answer that question. I haven't done the research and neither has anyone else involved in this discussion. But I do know that it is bad for our civic life if we decide that we are going start criminalizing groups of people that we don't like. Of course, real criminal activity should be handled by local law enforcement, but let's not make poverty a crime.

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